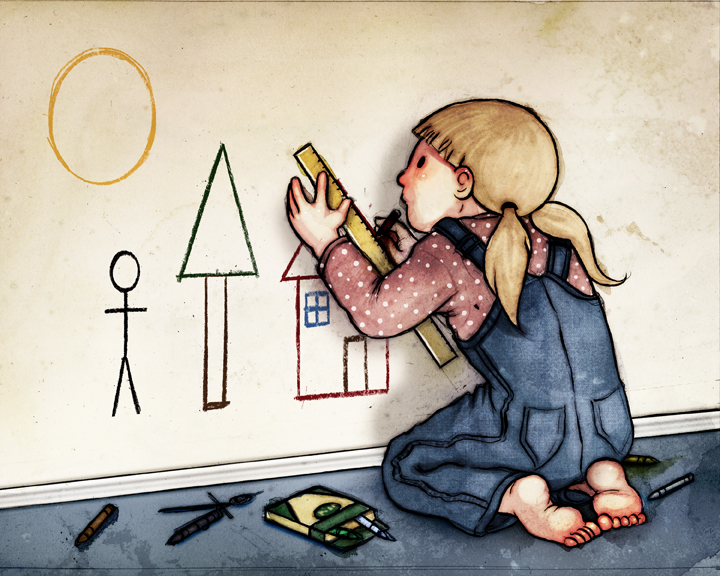
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“They Called Me Miss 99%”

*The reflections of an overachiever.*

For years I have been an overachiever – mix that with a heavy dose of perfectionism and a sense of determination that would rival the “Little Engine that Could,” and you have me. I have always succeeded at school, excelling in almost anything that I put my mind to. I was also a very independent and creative thinker, driving many a teacher to near insanity with my constant questioning of “Why?” Mr. Lindle still avoids me. As a whole I was quite proud of my little system and what it brought me; little did I know how damaging this mentality actually was. My determination to succeed was so severe that I lost perspective on what it really meant to succeed. Now I am not saying that wanting to succeed is a negative quality – far from it in fact. Who knows where we would be in this world without DaVinci, Einstein, even Bill Gates! The “determination to succeed” becomes a problem, however, when these small successes begin to define your life, especially when those successes are based upon the evaluation of others.

Marks were a vital part of this success mentality. If I got 95%, that wasn’t good enough, 79% **IS** a big deal, and to actually fail something?? The daily French dictée in Grade 7 that I received a 2/5 on still haunts my memory. I was never the boastful type; I did not use this as an outward comparison between myself and my peers, but instead as an inward criticism that I was not good enough. This criticism was actually not far from a type of paranoia: the belief that my parents would be disappointed in me, the thought that my teachers would consider my intellectual abilities as unstable, the despair that I was generally a failure in life, and the list goes on. Then there were the other kids. If I ‘beat’ them, the response was “Teacher’s Pet!”, “Goody goody!”, “Know-it-all!”, and if they ‘beat’ me, it became “you’re so stupid”, “**I** beat **YOU**!” – all of those seemingly childish antics that wreak havoc on any kid’s psyche. This only pushed the vicious circle further. I was the hamster that got his wheel going so fast that if he stopped, the little ball of fur would soon be plastered on the cage wall. A blow to my self-esteem meant I needed more success to define myself, which meant I needed higher marks, which meant I had to try harder, which led to an eventual mistake (not everyone is perfect) which led to a blow to my self-esteem and so on, ad nauseum.





***“You did well enough” is not an acceptable response. I want an answer. I want a way to improve.***

*"Our greatest glory is not in never failing, but in rising up every time we fail."*

*~ Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Fast forward to my senior year in high school. I was in advanced courses across the board and was doing about every extracurricular and volunteer activity possible – because this looks good to universities right? Then the laws of the universe decided to kick in – the fact that we as human beings, despite any effort we may put forth, cannot control everything that happens in our lives. Several deaths, a severe sports injury (think this meant no volleyball? Of course not!), a non-existent social life and the cancer diagnosis of one of my best friends and invaluable mentors all happened within a few weeks. It was as if the normal scale of unfortunate events that can happen in anyone’s life happened all at once.

Most people in this world have dealt with difficult situations and there are normally two patterns of thought surrounding the situation. After things have been dealt with, mended or enough time has passed, you can think back and say “It wasn’t that bad” or “It was tough, but I am thankful that I got through it”. However, to tell someone who is **in** the situation “It’s going to be okay” normally leaves that person feeling like “It’s going to be okay”...only after the use of their fist. It can often be very difficult to pull yourself out of the situation and to try and not only better the situation, but your attitude as well. For me, standing as an outsider looking back, you would think that it would be simple to say that I should have just realized that marks are not the defining factor in life. You would think that I should have not worried in the first place as there are other things in life that are, simply put, far more important. You would think that looking back would help me realize that getting a total of 25 hours of sleep in 7 days was absolutely insane for a 16 year old? (Isn’t it odd that we have such a sense of pride in how much pain we can put ourselves through?) You would think that this would help stop me from a breakdown in my 42SIB French class because I got a B+ on an assignment instead of an A? You would think...

This pattern continued into third year university when I was faced with what, at the time, appeared to be the ultimate dilemma. Should I, of all people, drop a course? Let’s say that again so you get the point. Should **I** drop a class? A class that wasn’t required for my degree, but one that I loved and was learning so much in; a class that I could have done really well in, but one that had the work load equivalent of proving the concept of General Relativity to a 5 year old. The thought was spawned, once again, by an exponential increase in life’s normal stresses. These stresses were the ones that are only supposed to come once in a blue moon, but instead came in multiples of 7 leaving me crumpled in a ball of frustration and tears more often than not.

To take a step aside and belay possible skepticism I should make a few comments. I know some who are reading this (and may not have even gotten this far based on the title) are thinking that this was all just ‘in my head’, that ‘I should have gotten a grasp on reality’ and that ‘Really, it’s not a big deal. Get over yourself.’ To you I say this: these stresses, both in high school and especially in university were things that forced me to deal with things no one my age should have to, and to make decisions for other people that not only affected my life, but affected their lives in a very serious and permanent way. Also, I am one of those people that hate it when other people’s difficulties are looked down upon just because they are ‘only a kid’. High school drama, although sometimes utterly ridiculous to outsiders, does still have a huge impact on students’ lives and how they think about things. (And if you think that the “high school” drama disappears just because you have left high school, you are deluding yourself). The things that you dealt with as a kid were tough; from everything like “you got the bigger half of the cookie!” to any form of peer pressure.

(cont…)



My opinion that any situation is difficult when you are in the midst of that situation does not grant excuses or a free pass to irresponsibility, just simply an understanding that: “Wait a second, I didn’t realize when I was 4 that going to bed at 7:00 was good for me; my parents actually loved me and were not just trying to make my life miserable”. This understanding means that if you do not yet have the experience or support to deal with a situation, that situation, whatever it may be, will still be potentially very difficult to deal with.

So we are back to that point of decision, where to an outsider it all looks very

obvious, but to the person in the middle of it, it does not look obvious at all.

I thought about this course at university that I loved, weighing all the ifs

and buts again and again. If I dropped the course did that make me a quitter

and a failure? Should I stick with it just to prove I could once again go against

all the odds and “succeed”? Should I dispel all the notions that I was only

dropping the course because I was too afraid to stay in the course and receive

a lower mark since I could not give it my best effort? In the end, was it worth

my sanity, my health and my general well being? This time, finally, something

struck the chord of reason, (a quality I had always prided myself on having!?!)

and I dropped the course. This decision snowballed into other areas of life where

I cut back the time I spent on things, I learned to say ‘no’, I finally stopped

denying both my mental and physical health and could actually start giving

the support to those around me that they not only needed, but deserved. I

slept very soundly that night. At the end of the year my transcript still read

A, A, A, but those little plus signs were missing. And it was alright.





***“Its easy to sit back into complacency. I refuse to.”***



As I look back now, I realize the valuable lesson I learnt that year and had in fact started learning many years before, although I was completely unaware of it. Does the grade really matter? Now I know there are people out there who are silently (or not so silently) nodding their heads. There certainly is a place for grades and a place for a set of standards in order to help students achieve and excel to their fullest potential. And, admittedly, I still feel a twinge of despair when I get a lower mark than I think I deserve. There are, however, much more important things. If we can critically examine how we think and what we think about, if we feel self-confident in our abilities and ourselves as people, if we have the desire to change the world for the greater good, and if we can retain knowledge because we truly get the “why” behind it, **that** is what matters. Even the sheer fact that there can be a show such as “Are You as Smart as a Fifth Grader”, never mind the fact that it is widely popular, brings up the question: “What on earth have we been learning these past years!” In the end, all of my frustrations and all of my conceived perceptions about my worth as a person being dictated by a number value and my tuning out the countless praises of my parents and teachers because I thought I wasn’t good enough, only served one purpose. That purpose? Taking small steps on my path towards critical and independent thought.

As I have now moved on to teaching, I see some of my students who have the same ideas and thoughts that I had and am still working so hard to change. As a response to this, I have made some standards for myself that some would argue are unrealistic, but that I will adhere to nonetheless. Never will I tell a student “95% is good enough” and, on the contrary, “49% is a failure and you did nothing right”. I will always strive to enable my students to think critically, to analyze concepts, thoughts and opinions, to communicate and empathize with others and to problem solve. I think we can all say that we have seen or had teachers (I myself have been one) who become frustrated with the students who ask “What can I do to do better” and due to time restraints, class sizes, or a myriad of other factors, they are at a complete loss to answer or challenge the student further. Most times students are really just asking for a higher grade, so the ones who want to really learn can be thrown under the bus. I will be the first to admit that the former case is a huge frustration of mine, and to those students I will try to explain my story. I will also admit that the latter is also very difficult to deal with; I don’t know that I would have wanted myself as a student either. However, since I know what it is like to be me, I will do my best to give that student an answer and a solution to this problem. Here once again my perfectionism and determination are kicking in, but these are now not centered around a life of unhappiness that I didn’t do enough, but rather a constant challenge to always do better. If this desire is lost by anyone in life, we lose a huge part of what it is to be human. By golly, me thinks she’s got it! Well, not quite; this learning process has just begun and will never end… but at least it is a step forwards.

Now all I ask of you is to take this lesson that I have learnt and to think about it. Whether or not you agree, it is the matter of making you think. My hope is that your realization will not be nearly as painful as the one I had to endure. Yes, there will certainly always be a place for grades and standards, but make this a process to foster life long learning and a deeper understanding of the world – to not dwell on what’s done, but use it to adapt and improve for the future. And, if you ever have the time to share your story with me, please, let me hear it! Spin it long, spin it well and give me something to ponder. I desperately want that 1%. But now I have learned that after that, I will still want more.

R. Iacobucci